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LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MARCH MADNESS, SYRIAN STYLE, AS ARBITRARY ARRESTS
AND DETENTIONS CONTINUE

REF: (A) DAM 1054 (B) DAM 929 (C) DAM 644

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: In addition to the recent detentions of Riad Seif and others during civil society-organized demonstrations, arbitrary arrests and detentions have continued in recent weeks. Targets have included a prominent civil society activist, the brother of a key post contact, and a journalist. While some recent detainees (including Seif) have eventually been released, a number of them still face legal charges. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) ARRESTS AT BOTH MARCH 9 AND MARCH 12 DEMONSTRATIONS: Recent demonstrations marking significant political anniversaries have included a number of arrests and detentions. Human rights activists report that five demonstrators were arrested on March 9, immediately following the peaceful demonstration protesting the 43-year continuation of Emergency Law (ref A). Three of the arrested demonstrators were identified as Shawkat Garaz al-Din, Ayham Badoor, Adnan Abu A'asi, while the two other arrestees remain unidentified. All five remain in custody. As noted in septel, leading opposition figure Riad Seif and four other protesters were detained following a demonstration on March 12, commemorating the second anniversary of the 2004 Kurdish Qamishli uprising. Seif was released late at night on March 12, while the other four protesters remain in custody.

13. (C) HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION SPOKESMAN ARRESTED UPON RETURN FROM U.S./EUROPEAN TOUR: Local human rights organizations have reported that Dr. Ammar Qurabbi, spokesman for the Syria-based Arab Human Rights Organization, was arrested upon his return to Syria on the afternoon of March 112. After being held by immigration officials for five hours at the airport, Qurabbi was then transferred to the Palestinian Investigative Branch of Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI). Qurrabi had been traveling abroad for the past two months, attending the Syrian National Congress in Washington in late January, as well as holding meetings in London and, most recently, Paris.

14. (C) Qurabbi's arrest may be based on his trip to Europe, as any Syrian activist traveling to both London and Paris at the moment is apparently the object of scrutiny, as these two cities are so connected in SARG minds to the offices of MB leader Ali Sadreddin Bayanouni and Abdulhalim Khaddam, respectively. (NOTE: To post's knowledge, no other SNC conference participant was arrested following his/her return from Washington. END NOTE) In addition, Qurabbi has also been the target of much criticism from within the opposition community itself. Furthermore, some contacts have noted that

an ideological split has taken shape within the AHRO, with some members wishing to adhere to their Arab nationalist political roots on one side, and Qurabbi and his supporters pleading for less politics and ideology and more focus on "pure" human rights issues. His "uncooperative" stance (as described by contacts) at the SNC conference in January, combined with rumors that he and his wife, journalist Bahia Mardini, had met with Syrian embassy officials in Washington, has made him a target for criticism by fellow civil society activists over the last few weeks.

¶5. (C) ACTIVIST'S APOLITICAL BROTHER DETAINED BY PSD: Meanwhile, women's and children's activist Daad Mousa told Poloff that her brother Ma'an had been arrested by Political Security Directorate (PSD) officials on February 22 and was held in an underground cell for eight days. (NOTE: This is the latest of Mousa's problems with PSD, previously reported in ref C. END NOTE) The brother, an administrator at the Damascus University Faculty of Education with no history of civil society activism, was summoned to the PSD branch for students and teachers in the Damascus neighborhood of Nissat on the night of February 22 and was held in a solitary, underground cell for eight days. He was beaten by security officials, who broke one of his teeth, and was accused of issuing false exam results for students wishing to defer military service. According to his sister, Ma'an's position does not entail issuing such documentation. On March 2nd, he appeared before a criminal judge for formal investigation, where four "witnesses" were presented, all of whom accused two security officials of torturing them to elicit statements implicating Ma'an. All four witnesses admitted to not being acquainted with Ma'an and noted that they did not even work in the same university faculties. Her brother was released from detention by the presiding judge but charges are still pending.

¶6. (C) When asked why she thought this had happened, Daad Mousa answered that it was clearly a threat against her; PSD knows that her family is her "weak spot." For now, Mousa plans to focus on obtaining psychological and medical care for her brother and convincing SARG authorities not to prosecute him. She is considering pursuing a civil case against PSD for her brother's wrongful imprisonment, although Syrian law makes such suits almost impossible to win.

¶7. (C) JOURNALIST DETAINED BY MILITARY INTELLIGENCE FOR FOUR DAYS AFTER REVEALING REORGANIZATION: Earlier this month, journalist Shaaban Abboud was detained by Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) authorities for four days, a week after he published an article in the Lebanese newspaper an-Nahar, describing reorganization plans and personnel moves at SMI. Abboud was arrested by SMI on March 2 and was released on bail March 6. According to human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni, he still faces prosecution by the Military Court, probably on charges relating to revealing state secrets. Contacts tell us that a group of well-connected journalist colleagues quietly intervened behind the scenes with high-level Syrian officials to obtain Abboud's release.

¶8. (C) UPDATES ON OTHER RECENT DETENTIONS: Meanwhile, the fates of activists and journalists detained since mid-February (ref B & C) have been mixed. Six students arrested by Air Force Security remain in custody with no further information available to human rights activists. Mohammed Riad ad-Drar, who was arrested on March 5 in front of the Supreme State Security Court, was released from detention March 9. Journalist Adel Mahfouz, who was detained in mid-February after calling for interfaith dialogue following the Mohammed cartoon controversy, was released on March 12 but still faces charges in criminal court.
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